

“INFORMATION ABOUT VICTIMS IN CONTACT”

EXCERPT FROM

ADVOCACY **BEYOND** LEAVING Helping Batter Women in Contact with Current or Former Partners

by Jill Davies



INFORMATION FOR VICTIMS IN CONTACT

Who are victims in contact?

They are women who continue relationships with their abusive partners or who interact in some way with former abusive partners. They come from every culture, class, race/ethnicity, immigration status, sexual orientation, community and situation.

If the victim has children, then the children are likely to be in contact with a partner, whether or not he is their father. Children are also likely to be in contact with their father, even if he is no longer their mother's partner.

Why do some victims remain in the relationship?

The reason will be unique to each victim. In general, victims remain if leaving will make their lives or their children's lives worse, they have no real option or resources to leave, or there are enough positives in the relationship to make it worth putting up with some level of violence and control. When a victim remains in the relationship, her children do too. Even if she leaves their father, the children are still likely to have at least some contact or relationship with him and his family.

Leaving is often a high risk decision. For some victims, leaving makes their lives worse (even though remaining is difficult and painful). Leaving may mean an escalation of her partner's violence, increased risks for her children, the loss of her home, income, job, health insurance, immigration status, her faith community and even the support of family and friends. Usually, leaving also means a significant loss of financial stability. For many victims, leaving means that they will not be able to properly feed their children, get them health care, or keep them from being homeless. Many families struggle to support one household; supporting two is not an option. For many victims living in poverty, there is no real option to leave.

Victims who are parents also worry about the impact of leaving on their children. "How will leaving affect their relationship with their father? Will my children be better off if I leave?" Some children are better off, when no longer exposed to the violence and abuse of their mother's partner. Yet for

some battered mothers, leaving may make it difficult or impossible to keep their children emotionally or physically safe. For example, a mother will not be there to intervene if her children face poor or violent parenting from their father. Or, their father may simply have little ability or willingness to cooperate regarding parenting and contact, making visitation exchanges difficult and frightening for children, and often for their mothers as well. Although many children continue beneficial contact with their father after their parents' relationship is over, many battered mothers worry about what it means for their children if they no longer live with their father. Some victims suffer the violence and disrespect to ensure their children have an "intact" family, believing that is what is best.

To understand why a victim remains with a partner who is abusive, we have to put ourselves in her shoes. We have to understand the violence and control in the context of her life circumstances, her family and her culture. For some victims, their relationship means shared lives, children and extended families. Their commitment to keeping their family together and keeping their promises is part of who they are. This is particularly true for victims with cultural backgrounds that include rigid rules regarding marriage and hold women responsible for the well-being of the entire family. They might see it as their "duty" to give their partner a chance to change. For some victims, the violence is horrific and life-threatening, for some painful and dangerous, yet for others the violence is minor and the control minimal. Some live in constant fear and others are not afraid. Victims also have a complex and complete view of their partners- they see the good along with the bad.

Victims are not masochists bent on suffering, nor are they living in a fantasy world. Victims do what we all do- deal with what life hands us. For some, remaining or leaving is a formal decision, a weighing of the pros and cons. For others it is informal, simply coping with the current situation because it seems tolerable or there are no better options or alternatives. Most victims cope with the bad and hope for the better, living with the status quo, making the decisions they must, and doing what they can to make things better along the way. Leaving is not a simple decision, nor one easily made.

Why do victims remain in contact?

For many victims (as with most people), it is not realistic or even beneficial to break all connections made during a relationship. If a victim has children with her former partner there are parenting and financial reasons to continue contact. Many victims will remain in contact so that their children can

see their father. Similarly, his friends and family may have become her friends and family. She may just simply "see him around" the neighborhood, at work, at church, or elsewhere in the community. He might be a resource she turns to if she's in trouble and he too may seek her out for help. This is particularly true if they are both living in poverty. For example, a victim might "take him in" for a few days so her children's dad isn't living on the street. The contact may reflect an "on again, off again" relationship, one in which one or both partners are looking for the other to change.

Some victims have no choice about contact, ordered by a court to share decision-making about the children and to see him each time he picks up the children for visitation. Even if visitation exchanges are made through a visitation center or third party, a victim will still be in contact through her children as she monitors how they are doing and listens to them talk about visits with their father.

Contact might also be part of a safety strategy. It might be better to stay in touch to be able to assess his behavior and risk—"keep an eye on him." He might also just keep "coming around" and it is safer to just let that happen.

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